Discussant Commentary

MAPA Social Innovation Lab:

Working at the Intersection of Theory U and Freirean Pedagogy

José Romero Keith

InovAAAcción
jose.k.romero@harvard.post.edu

Introduction

The purpose of this commentary is to support and build on the article MAPA: Co-Creating New Narratives for the 21st Century (Sbardelini et al., 2022), by placing the work within a broader theoretical and practice perspective, and surfacing an as-yet unseen intersection of two seminal works of transformative change, thought and action. MAPA seeks to construct a new gender narrative for the 21st century through a social innovation lab. To explore the guiding question, "*what do the new narratives of feminine and masculine values for the 21st Century look like,*" the authors applied the Theory U (Scharmer, 2016) method to identify blind spots and, from there, activate innovative thinking and co-creation in the service of new gender narratives. They built a pluralistic action research group and examined key gender issues including masculinity, gender identity, and intersectionality.

Gender inequality is a global matter that is riddled by the symbolic and physical violence of patriarchy (Bourdieu, 1998). It takes different cultural forms through history and geography, but its main characteristic is the exercise of

masculine, physical or symbolic violence, a historic generator of inequality towards women (Lerner, 1986). In the context of these catastrophic global trends (including climate change, COVID 19 pandemic, and the global economic recession,), a new civilization is being born. Just as many dysfunctional values are dying, new possibilities for gender equality are emerging. The challenge is to allow the old toxic patterns to die, while injecting energy and enthusiasm into our humane and sustainable desired future. This is the intention declared and embodied in the MAPA Social Innovation Lab.

During my review of the MAPA findings, a curious situation occurred: I felt a deeply erudite but invisible presence in the conversation. Although he was not mentioned explicitly, it was as if Paulo Freire, the renowned Brazilian educator, was participating in the dialogue. In my perception, MAPA participants, Otto Scharmer and Paulo Freire engaged freely and with astounding synchronicity in a significant conversation

The intention of this paper is to unveil Freire's hidden presence in this argument, to make his work and thinking visible, and to posit possible dialogues with Scharmer that enrich the MAPA process into the construction of the new gender narrative.

Shared Intention: Transforming Consciousness

Scharmer and Freire see their ultimate goal as the generation of collective consciousness for social transformation. As we can see in Scharmer´s matrix of social evolution, he explores four fields of attention: habitual, egoic, empathic, and generative (Scharmer 2018, pp. 34-36). Each field demands shifts in mindset and awareness in order to evolve from ego-centered habits to a collective consciousness that serves the entire system.
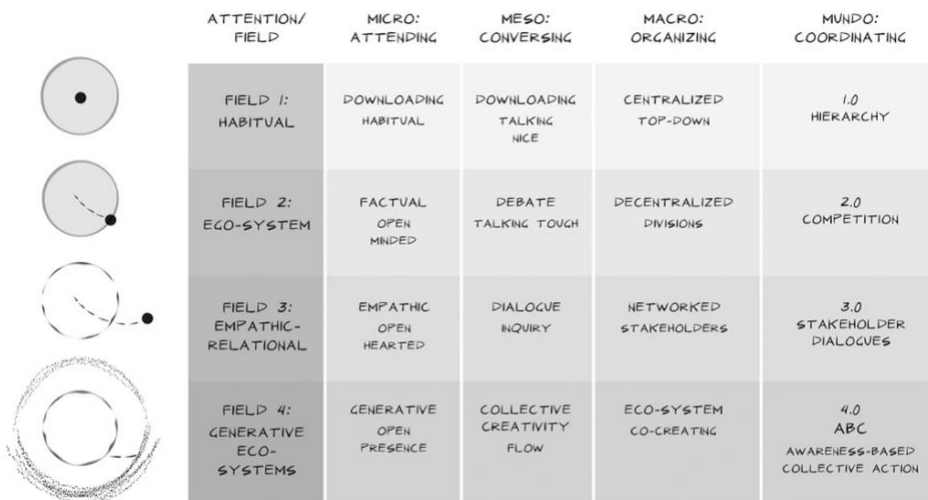
ATTENTION/ FIELD	MICRO: ATTENDING	MESO: CONVERSING	MACRO: ORGANIZING	MUNDO: COORDINATING
FIELD 1: HABITUAL	DOWNLOADING HABITUAL	DOWNLOADING TALKING NICE	CENTRALIZED TOP-DOWN	1.0 HIERARCHY
FIELD 2: ECO-SYSTEM	FACTUAL OPEN MINDED	DEBATE TALKING TOUGH	DECENTRALIZED DIVISIONS	2.0 COMPETITION
FIELD 3: EMPATHIC- RELATIONAL	EMPATHIC OPEN HEARTED	DIALOGUE INQUIRY	NETWORKED STAKEHOLDERS	3.0 STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES
FIELD 4: GENERATIVE ECO- SYSTEMS	GENERATIVE OPEN PRESENCE	COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY FLOW	ECO-SYSTEM CO-CREATING	4.0 ABC AWARENESS-BASED COLLECTIVE ACTION

Figure 1: Matrix of Social Evolution (Scharmer, 2018).

Theory U provides both process and practices that build the capacities of individuals and collectives to operate from deeper fields of attention.

Freire journeys through four similar stages:

1. "Intransitive awareness," in which the oppressed internalizes the oppression of the oppressor. *Intransitive awareness* exists in a colonized world where the "culture of silence" rules.

2. "Naïve transitive awareness" is a functional acceptance of the system as "is." There is a recognition that social systems can be improved, but structurally things are fine as they are.

3. "Critical transitive awareness" is a critical posture towards the present and a recognition that change is needed. As a result, the realm of possibility appears.

4. "Critical consciousness" is a level of awareness in which the visualization and construction of the emerging future becomes not only necessary but also possible. (Freire, 1976, pp. 52–101)

In both works we see consciousness centered as the key force of transformative change. Each provide nuance to the developmental journey to deeper levels of consciousness. Scharmer's contributes to an understanding of this journey at various levels of scale, while Freire addresses the dynamics of power that must be transcended to arrive at an emancipatory consciousness that fuels transformative change.

In terms of gender equality awareness, MAPA can be seen as moving through four stages, reflecting both Scharmer and Freire's methods. First, MAPA found a gender reality plagued with dualities such as masculine/feminine, objective/subjective, and logical/intuitive, all sustained by culture and habit, or what Freire calls the *culture of silence*. For Freire (1977, pp. 206–207), in a culture of silence, human beings are understood as beings of adaptation, adjustment, and passivity. There is a naïve and false understanding of reality. The *being for oneself* gets lost and becomes the *being for others*.

In stage two, as they identified blind spots, the MAPA group entered the phase of discovering themselves bound by an institutionalized patriarchy. Through group dialogue, they became aware and critical of the various forms of violence experienced by individuals in the group (Sbardelini et al., 2022, pp. 114). In stage three, they critically questioned the ego boundaries that imprison them, often disguised as expressions of empathy (pp. 114–116). This specifically happened with the conversations relating to who gets to speak for and about transexual experience. Finally, in stage four, they engaged in the emergence of a new future where a discussion of vulnerability, pain, plurality, and multiple knowledge took place.

One surprising point of convergence between Freire and Scharmer can be found in the space of "dialogic empathy." Scharmer claims that communication and relationship-building finds it breakthrough point in level three of listening—

empathic—which move us from ego to eco awareness and vision. This is where the subject/object relationship transforms into a subject/subject fusion. For Freire (1977, pp. 101-102), dialogue is truth, it is the true word, it transforms the world, it is where humankind meets; it is an existential demand, a true creative act, an act of deep love, of courage, of commitment with humanhood.

Empathic dialogue is the building block of change in both Freire's and Scharmer's work, allowing the reconstruction of relationships so that they can move from vertical, habitual, and ego driven behavioral patterns, to empathic and communicative, to, finally, generative collaboration. The comments and exchanges shared from the MAPA Social Innovation Lab illuminate the transformative potential of empathic dialogue, here in the context of constructing new gender narratives.

Freire's Unique Contribution: The Relevance of Culture

Perhaps Freire's greatest contribution to social transformation can be found in the field of deep cultural understanding and its relationship to social change (MacKenna, 2013).

For Freire, the only way to liberate oppressed populations and activate them into political action, is by decodifying cultural blind spots. Decodifying is the art of decoding cultural symbols, understanding their hidden meaning, evolving into critical thinking and political action (Torres Novoa, 1979). In this sense, rural peasant culture and cosmogony need to be decodified, so that political transformative action becomes possible. This is where he proposes his classic five-step method that has deeply influenced social movements throughout Latin America and Africa, resulting in new national alphabetization processes, and increased popular education (Freire, 1986).

Freire's Decodification Process	
Step 1	Deeply understand historical and cultural context (*unidad epocal*).
Step 2	Define generative themes (*temas generadores*) within a given culture that define the cultural milestones or priorities and, when touched, explode with energy and meaning;
Step 3	Understand resistance to change (*situaciones limite*) by exploring the hidden cultural frontiers that reproduce self-generating cultural habits. How does the power of "habit" operate in such a way that it reproduces itself?
Step 4	Decodify through images, i.e., go beyond words, black and white, and written language. Enter the arena of "image and art" to recognize, decodify, and rebuild action.
Step 5	Discover significant dimensions (*dimensiones significativas*) that highlight possible action.

Figure 2: Decodification (Freire, 1977, pp. 112-125).

Regarding the parallels between Freire and Scharmer, the Freirean method can be profoundly useful in the "co sensing" movement, or the phase of systemic construction of knowledge. Scharmer (2018) describes co-sensing as stepping out of one's own "bubble" and immersing in the perspective and experience of others as it is through these experiences that the seeds of the future become known (pp. 84–85). The understanding of culture is a fundamental part of this movement in Theory U, although it is not explicitly addressed within the framework. Providing a process to dive into culture in order to construct a systemic and holistic vision of the topic or area undergoing transformation, is a distinct contribution and enhancement Freire can make to Theory U.

The Theory–Practice Dilemma

Scharmer and Freire once again converge in their view that the gap between theory and practice is perhaps the greatest challenge of modernity. While there are a myriad of theoretical solutions to the great problems of our times, we see few concrete, sustainable solutions. I understand their approaches to this predicament or bridging theory and practice through three main axes.

The epistemological axis: Freire understands that a dialectical relationship between theory and practice begins with practice. As you explore reality, practice generates knowledge which, in turn, informs practice; the spiral moves in a dialectic and evolutionary way. When you add the component of social justice, the theory-practice dialectical solution takes you into the search for a new world. For Scharmer, the theory-practice relationship can be summarized as a core principle of his work, drawn from Kurt Lewin: "you cannot understand a system *unless you change it* [emphasis added]" (Scharmer, 2016, p.18). One could claim that Freire is a bit more orthodox in his demand that knowledge-generation starts with practice. Scharmer is more flexible, open to beginning with either theory or practice, as long as the dialectical "reflective practitioner" flow gets rolling.

The methodological axis: In Theory U, Scharmer connects three main movements in the process of awareness-based social change: "co-sensing," "presencing," and "prototyping". Simply put, a clear intention for systemic social change is coupled with a process to explore and gain deep knowledge of social reality and self, as a means to cultivate effective social action. Freire "decodes" false or naïve consciousness into new learning. Only then does he tackle the challenges of social transformation. Decodification means transcending the colonized oppressed mind, the culture of silence; new learning captures the demands from reality; social transformation is derived from the critical view engendered by ethics and social justice.

The historical axis. The structure of social reality in a given moment determines the pace and possibilities for social change so the analysis of the historical context within which social change is desired asks the question, *what change is possible and under what conditions?* Scharmer (2018) locates this phenomenon in his understanding of the *social field*, where the quality of our collective being together can be nurtured and fertilized like the earth itself,

yielding more generative and health-supporting results (p. 15). Freire's approximation to Scharmer's social field is what he calls "history," stating that in history, one does what one can do and not what one wants to do (Freire, 1983, INEA).

In nurturing new gender narratives, the MAPA Social Innovation Lab traverses the theory-practice arena, generating important prototypes such as the online gender course that was collectively developed. Much new learning is happening already, but this powerful space needs to be energized further. Whether the MAPA group enters into further action research on gender equality, evolves the theory of gender values, or implements prototypes, all efforts can be enhanced by increasing awareness of the nature of the contribution and its relationship to the wider context of awareness-based systems change – here discussed through the lens of Scharmer and Freire's work.

Closing Remarks

The MAPA group constructed a decolonizing theoretical framework and applied the principles and movements of the Theory U methodology to shape an awareness-based systemic change journey. They crafted a journey into the construction of consciousness through empathic dialogue, the integration of a pluralistic working group, the integration of Indigenous (Guarani) culture, and the recognition and revision of their Western colonized gender culture,. In their effort to advance in the construction of new gender narratives for the 21st century, they embodied the intersection of Scharmer's Theory U and Freire's emancipatory education. Going forward, I invite the authors and those working in this space to strengthen the Scharmer–Freire dialogue, incorporating culture to transformational change and advancing in the relationship between individual and collective consciousness, to evolve into a holistic, integrative and dignified vision of gender equality for the coming century.

José Romero Keith is founder and main consultant at InovAAAcción, a consulting firm which operates from Mexico City www.romerokeith.org. He received his B.A. from Harvard University. He went on to receive his MA and Ph.D. in sociology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM. He worked for United Nations agencies for 16 years, especially UNDP and PAHO-WHO. His area of expertise is capacity development and learning, applied in the field of public health and sustainable development.

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Acknowledgement